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ABSTRACT

The phenomenological methods used to analyze the unique characteristics contributing to the stability of a small mid-western rural town may be useful tools for community researchers, providing an inexpensive, non-technical, humanistic-interpretive research approach. General concepts associated with community success were formulated through direct observation and indepth interviewing and fell into broad structural and cultural parameters. The sturctural parameter had three components: geographic conditions (physical boundaries), demographic conditions (age composition and community size), and institutional conditions (banks, school, churches, etc.) The cultural parameter was less "objective" in character and encompassed social momentum (the historical continuity impacting on current actions of residents), cognitive mapping (residents' identification with the community), and symbolic aspects of institutionalized community practices. These general parameters were and can be used as a first approximation of a taxonomy of community stability. Thematizing important characteristics of community viability should aid in distributing available resources in the most effective manner possible, thereby minimizing the waste of human as well as government resources. (NEC)

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AN EXPLORATORY CASE STUDY OF A STABLE RURAL COMMUNITY: A QUASI-PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH WITH PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

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"Direct observation is the primary concern of phenomenology; and direct observation is held to be prior to all theory." (Farber, 1966:48)

INTRODUCTION

In many ways the significance of this paper lies in the methods used to compile the data more than in the findings themselves. We did not become familiar with community research before examining and interpreting our data. We felt our naivete could lead us to a less biased interpretation. Our phenomenological approach was based on reducing external influences in the act of perceiving. Hence, we felt it would be more true to the way of phenomenology not to contaminate our field of perception with preconceived categories and perspectives.

What the final product shows, we feel, is that the method of phenomenology can be a useful tool for community research. Reviewers have pointed out that much of what we report here has been articulated elsewhere. This can be seen as negative; however, it is also positive. We have been able to replicate previous work and thereby point out its present applicability, and we have done this with no background in the area of community research and armed with only a pencil and paper. This shows the importance of the phenomenological method for community analysts. They do not necessarily need a computer and thousands of dollars to do research. Further, even if they do have these resources, this method can still add valuable insight at a humanistic-interpretive level that computers fail to achieve. The following, then, is to be considered within this light, as being both a methodological and a substantive exposition.

ETHNOGRAPHY

In the process of doing an indepth research study of a small rural

community it became apparent that the community possessed unique characteristics which set it apart from other less successful rural communities. The task of this paper is to articulate what sets this community apart and to begin to characterize these factors so as to set a foundation for a simple taxonomy of rural community viability. After a brief ethnography, we will begin to explicate what, for us, appeared to be the important characteristics of this rural community. The broad parameters we will deal with are presented as first level grounded concepts. They were culled from our direct participant observation and indepth interviewing experiences in a manner similar to the Glaser and Strauss grounded approach to theory building (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Rural Town is a small community (population 1,143 according to the 1980 Census) located in the mid-western United States. Beyond being located in a state known for its premiere farm land, Rural Town is located in an area considered to hold some of the best farm land in that state. Thus, Rural Town is situated in a region which is exceptionally rich in farming resources. There are two substantially larger rural communities located on either side of Rural Town, Resort Town and Work Town, both of which provide economic resources for Rural Town, as well as cultural-leisure opportunities. However, both are set apart from Rural Town by the county line to the east and a river to the west. These structural conditions aid Rural Town residents in cognitively mapping their community as distinct and autonomous and adds to the community's general viability.

Because of these clear boundaries, at least they are clear in the eyes of the residents, people from Rural Town tend to feel very independent even though numerous community residents work in these neighboring communities. As one person put it, "Rural Town is somewhat of a bedroom community to these other

towns but people want to live here because we don't have the problems they have in Resort Town or Work Town." Hence, residents seem to understand the importance of these neighboring communities, but they tend to play up the quality of life in Rural Town as distinct from and better than Resort Town or Work Town.

FINDINGS

Although most residents of Rural Town tend to argue that their community is successful due to the inhabitants, we believe that there are certain other factors which come into play as necessary ingredients for a stable community. In metaphoric terms, what we are suggesting is an analog to cooking. In order to bake a cake and have it turn out successfully one must first have access to all of the necessary ingredients. Though the combination of the ingredients is also important, at this point we are more concerned with articulating what some of the necessary ingredients might be. Even if the community residents are willing to invest their energy and resources into the community, without the raw materials needed to create a stable community the outcome may be something less than successful. It would be similar to baking a cake without all of the ingredients. The result may resemble a cake, however, if certain of the main ingredients are missing even this level of achievement may not be reached. Stretching the metaphor even further, we tend to see the residents of Rural Town as 'cooks' baking a cake. Some cooks are undoubtably better than others, as are some groups more active than others. Yet, regardless of the quality of the cooks, without the necessary ingredients they are not of sufficient import to achieve the hoped for result.

In the remainder of this section we will present the general concepts we have drawn from our interpretations of Rural Town and its residents through

direct observation and indepth interviewing. Both authors spent many days observing the general life of the community (taking part in community events such as a Fourth of July celebration and a community barn dance), conducting indepth interviews with a variety of community residents, and compiling the information from which these concepts are drawn. The concepts we found to be associated with community success fall into two broad parameters: a structural parameter and a cultural parameter.

STRUCTURAL PARAMETER [1]

The first necessary general parameter to be explicated is the structural parameter. This general parameter has three components which appear to contribute to the well-being of the community: (1) geographic conditions, (2) demographic conditions, and (3) institutional conditions.

GEOGRAPHIC CONDITIONS. As noted before, Rural Town is situated in an exceptionally rich farming area. If this were not the case a major amount of the community's prosperity would be undermined. There simply are not enough jobs in the community to support its population and most of the existing jobs are directly related to farming. The geography of the area also serves to separate Rural Town from its neighbors. The distance setting them apart increases the amount of goods proximate farmers purchase in Rural Town. It is simply easier for them to deal with Rural Town businesses than to trade in nearby towns. The neighboring communities, however, are not so far away as to make Rural Town an isolated settlement. Residents are able to draw upon resources available in the neighboring communities and not in there own (for example, movie theaters and restaurants).

In addition, the physical boundaries (the county line and river) aid Rural Town residents in creating a cognitive map of their town. By forming a

cognitive map the individuals can better hold in mind the general symbolic notion of their community as somehow a distinct unity rather than a set of discrete dwellings. Without some type of cognitive structure individuals would be unable to be self-reflective with regard to their community, for with no cognitive map the community does not exist at a symbolic level. There are other physical structures (the school, churches, banks, etc.) which Rural Town residents use as part of their cognitive map, but the aforementioned physicial boundaries stand out in importance because they act as a framing device for Rural Town residents. We agree with Stoneall who said,

> "In looking at spatial aspects of community, we uncover a part, but an important part, of the social perception of a given place. Cognitive mapping is a creative imposition of meaning upon the apparent diversity of the ... (area). Cognitive maps help people locate themselves in physical space and thereby know who they are and whom they may encounter." (Stoneall, 1978:133)

In short, Rural Town is endowed with a physical environment which is highly condusive to community stability and viability.

DEMOGRAPHIC CONDITIONS. As we see it there are two basic demographic factors which contribute to the strength of the Rural Town community.. The first aspect is the age structure of the community. Like many other small communities, Rural Town has fewer young adults than any other age group, and therefore proportionately more elderly (26 percent of the population is over age 65). What tends to set Rural Town apart, however, is both structural and cultural in that the elderly in Rural Town act as a community resource. Structurally this occurs because the elders who retire to the community from the surrounding farms are fairly wealthy as a consequence of the geographic location. Upon moving into the community upon retirement, they bring in resources rather than draining resources away. Therefore, in a directly economic sense, they add to the viability of the community--they have money to spend and because they are generally less mobile, they spend much of it in

Rural Town.

Culturally, Rural Town residents tend to define their elders as a social resource. One of the residents noted, "the retired folks are an asset to the community--they have time, money, and insight. Retired people make a great contribution to this community." This attitude has not developed over night without reason, but in causal terms it is difficult to determine which came first: the fact that the elderly are highly active in the community might have produced the attitude of elderly as resources or the attitude of elderly as resources might have caused community members to act toward them as resources. The causal priority of the attitude or behavior, however, is of less import than the fact that the age structure of the community is top heavy and that rather than being a drain on community resources this top heavy age structure acts as a positive resource base.

The actual size of the population is the second aspect of the demographic character of the community which surfaces as important to us. Numerous members of the community told us of a close 'we' relation in Rural Town. As one informant put it, "There is a high sense of brotherhood or comradery here." However, he also pointed out that because the town folks are closely knit, "sometimes they are slow to welcome new people into town." This high level of closeness is, we feel, partly due to the small size of the community. Because Rural Town is so small (1,143 residents) and because there is self-selectivity at least at a minimal level, the general intersubjective experience of the population is at a level hard to attain in more heterogeneous populations. From a phenomenological point of view, intersubjectivity refers to, "a plurality of subjectivities making up a community sharing a common world (Spiegelberg, 1976:719)." Thus, with high intersubjective experience the community becomes highly solidified.

The small population size also has implications for cognitive mapping. Cognitive mapping is easier in a setting where the horizon of the environmental field is small. Because of human limitations people can not cognitively apperceive extremely varied and heterogeneous environments without narrowing the boundaries or constitutive elements of the object of perception. In Rural Town, the horizon of the apperceived object is quite small and homogeneous, thereby allowing the individual to include a greater proportion of the significant environmental field.

Both in physical and numeric terms, the size of Rural Town is condusive to feeling comfortable with the setting. The small size of the community contributes to the clearity of each resident's cognitive map. Because self-selectivity and intersubjectivity are related to community size, we assert that size plays an important role in feelings of fellowship. As Homans has argued, propinquity breeds association which motivates the growth of sentiments (Homans, 1950). This is not to deny that there are other, less positive attributes of small community size. For example, small size may bring about boredom which can be stressful.

From this exposition it seems clear that community size and age composition are important factors in partially determining the social ramifications of community life. Any researcher studying a community should be aware of these potential ramifications and take them into consideration when investigating community life. For instance, in our work most of the community residents interpret small size as positive and act on this interpretation. If this were not the case, small size might act as a liability rather than an asset.

INSTITUIONAL CONDITIONS. Banks. Rural Town has three viable banking

institutions which are fairly important to the community. The fact that the banks are all financially successful is significant, but their relationship to the members of the community is equally important. The residents act toward the bank managements as just folks who are there to help. The banks are considered important resources to the town not only because they lend money to individuals, but because they actively work for the betterment of the community as a whole. As noted by a community member, "we don't wait for things to come to us, we go out and get them and the banks help us do that. The banks are very supportive." Another said in reference to Rural Town's banks, "Issues are taken care of in a more personal manner than going through bureaucratic channels."

We believe that in some respects the banks function to symbolize to residents the feeling that there is a difference between their town and other communities. One informant pointed out how differently the banks operated in a proximate small town where she had once lived as compared to the friendly attitude of her bank in Rural Town. The bankers tend to strengthen this feeling by the manner of their interaction with local residents. They present themselves to the general community as in no way being much different than anyone else. On numerous occassions we found the vice-president of one bank talking to community members in a local cafe.

School. The school (kindergarten thru twelfth grade) is an extremely important institution in Rural Town for both practical and symbolic reasons. Practically speaking, the school is the center for many of the activities carried out in the community. School activities act as a catalyst for bringing the youth and adult populations together in an interactive context. As one resident put it, "Much of Rural Town's activities revolve around the school," and because of this "people are worried about losing students from the

school--people in town don't want to lose the school." Another said,"The school is one of the few sources of concern in the town." The residents understand the potential consequences for their community if the school is closed: loss of an interaction arena, loss of a medium of integration of youth and adult populations, and a loss of numerous jobs for town residents.

There is yet another ramification of the school closing, which is less objective in character, but of potentially equal significance for Rural Town. Rural Town residents are vitally aware of the changing character of small rural communities, and are greatly concerned that the institutional character of their town does not change to such an extent that they can no longer consider themselves to be a vital and growing entity.[2]

Churches. The community in general seems to hold their churches and church related activities in high regard, but residents are not overly concerned with participating in all church activities. As one minister noted, "There isn't real high participation in all of this church's services." Even so, another minister commented, "Church is still one of the centers of the community," and in this way acts as a steering device for the town residents. Community members use the churches for moral support and tradition-based continuity. Yet another minister noted that, "This community is somewhat more static than other communities I've been in with respect to traditional religious beliefs. The community doesn't seem to be actively against church oriented change but they don't really try to bring about any innovations in church either." Hence, we see the churches used as an institutionalized medium for expounding a moral viewpoint which is founded on tradition as well as religiosity.

The church is also used as a means of social communication and a starting point for informal support networks. Thus, both the number of churches (three)

and the fact that they function to solidify the community and to create social awareness in situations of crisis appear as important structural features of the community.

CULTURAL PARAMETER [3]

Our second major parameter deals with items which are less "objective" in character. We have termed it the cultural parameter and it also has three components: (1) social momentum, (2) cognitive mapping, and (3) symbolic aspects of community. These components have been dealt with to some degree earlier in the paper but will be examined more thoroughly at this point.

SOCIAL MOMENTUM. In speaking of social momentum we are referring to the socio-historical element of a community's life. This socio-historical element evidences itself as a generally pervasive ethos or spirit in the community. As the term momentum connotes, we feel there is a certain historical impetus or community continuity which tends to impact on the current actions of residents. Rural Town residents actively maintain a self-perception of the community as a friendly place to live and as exuding a spirit of fellowship. Town members tend to say that they look out for each other in a manner not unlike how one looks out for distant kin members of the family. "This is a close knit community. We are concerned about other people, but mainly people in Rural Town." "There is a high spirit of informality here." These statements all point out Rural Town's self-perceived comradery. This fairly overt and animated presentation of self, we believe, tends to have a certain deterministic quality. Past activities are coloring present action and attitude.

Because of the traditionalism in the community, residents also feel a responsibility to maintain the image of Rural Town as a friendly community.

One respondent noted, "Self-pride in our community has a history. It's been here and just seems to carry on." Another felt that, "due to the size of Rural Town there is a growth of fellowship." Others mentioned working together and ego-investment as important. "There's much self-investment in town"; "there is a growth of solidarity across the ages because people work together to keep up the community." We found evidence of this in many ways. For example, each spring the town council solicits help from the school, the elderly, and all others who can spare the time, to clean the city park, golf course, and other community facilities. We agree that size and ego-investment contribute to comradery, but they alone do not address how the spirit of comradery is sustained.

In studying Rural Town we have come to see its history as important regarding sentiments of "brotherhood". Although, as noted earlier, people are not directly aware of social-momentum nor do they speak of it in those terms, it was implicit in remarks from numerous informants: "People are conditioned to see things here as positive." "Because Rural Town is growing there is a feeling that we need to stay active to remain like we were, a friendly little community." "We are basically like we were in the past, but we've got to work to keep this place alive. We want to grow but we want to be conservative."

These references to the town's history and the feeling of being conditioned are important indicators of what we mean by social-momentum. Although we have no definitive evidence, there is some indication that early community faternal organizations began to set the stage for many of the present residents' feelings of closeness. One of our older informants (in his 70's) traced community pride and brotherhood back to two fraternal organizations. The informant felt that these organizations brought many of the town residents together in such a way as to produce a feeling of closeness which has affected

the community in general. Although neither of these organizations are now as dominant in Rural Town as they once were, they acted as seed organizations which produced high participation in numerous other voluntary organizations. Our informant also noted that at one time in the 1930s Rural Town supported a semi-pro sports team which was quite good. This may also have helped people identify with the community and may have fostered a feeling of community pride.

What seems to have occured, then, is a situation wherein these entities began to formulate in the community a type of self-identity or "stock of knowledge (Schutz, 1970)." Although the entities themselves no longer function in this capacity, the self-identity has carried on. The identity is historical in nature, and appears as social-conditioning in form. We feel that had it not been for these earlier circumstances (all of which we can not articulate here) the personality of the community might be quite different. As Schutz (1970:74) stated, "(m)an in daily life...finds at any given moment a stock of knowledge at hand that serves him as a scheme of interpretation of his past and present experiences and also determines his anticipation of things to come."

COGNITIVE MAPPING. We feel that a residents' cognitive map is important with regard to their ability to identify with the community. It may be that if a community is so large and diverse that a community member is unable to cognitively map the community this precludes their ability to identify with the entirety of the community in more than a rudimentary way. In large heterogeneous metroplitan settings, residents tend to carve out and identify with a smaller section of the larger context. A potential by-product of this highly distilled cognitive map is the fragmentation of the entire community in the eyes of its residents. This type of fragmentation is potentially condusive to intra-community conflict, and though it is by no means the only factor which

may act to bring about conflict, it is one that needs to be investigated more thoroughly.

Cognitive mapping, for us, is a unifying concept since it combines the individual's cognitive structure and its potential interaction with the environmental field within which they carry out their life activities. It is also related to our final cultural component, the symbolic aspects of a community. The ramification of an individual's cognitive map may be understood as a necessary, but not sufficient element in forming community identity. By this we are saying that a cognitive map is a necessity for individual community members if they are to represent to the self a unified construct of community. However, the meaning this unified construct of community holds for each community member is related to the symbolic meaning the cognitively mapped elements hold for the self.

SYMBOLIC ASPECTS OF COMMUNITY. As the final cultural component we want to denote the importance of symbolic aspects of community. Stoneall (1978) has argued that residents of a community socially construct the community as meaningful. This symbolic aspect is important since it is by use of symbolic representation that an area is framed in a meaning context. We asserted earlier that the school was very important to Rural Town residents. As a physical entity the school has significant resources the town's people use. Yet, beyond this, the school signifies to the residents that their town is still alive. Burns (1982) notes that,

> "as rural schools lose their base of support and consolidate, parents of school age children begin to migrate out of the small towns where schools closed. Hence, as long as their school remains open town members feel justified in investing their energy in the community because the school signifies to them that this town is able to add new human resources to its resource base."

Symbolically, the school stands for much more than an educational institution. It acts as a microcosm of the vitality of the entire community. In the

symbolic realm, the school, as long as it remains viable, reflects its vitality back on the community. It is a reflexive symbol or barometer of the community's future potential.

Many other institutionalized practices act in a manner similar to this. Thus, we see the banks, the churches, and the voluntary organizations as acting as symbolically infused entities which aid town members in defining themselves, others, and the community.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS OF THE FOREGOING

Overall then, community prosperity may be partially based on all six sub-components articulated in the body of this paper: structural components made up of (1) geography, (2) demography, and (3) institutions and cultural components made up of (1) social momentum, (2) cognitive mapping, and (3) symbolic aspects. We have elucidated these attributes in Rural Town and analyzed their potentially significant character and consequence for the community's future. The conceptual outline we used contains two broad community parameters which can be used by community analysts as sensitizing concepts that highlight important aspects of any community. These broad parameters are tools which can help community analysts to identify the limitations and future potential of small rural communities. This is analogous to the use of triage in medicine. These concepts, taken as a working whole, can indicate the basic character of a community, as well as which elements of a community are viable and which elements are not. By so doing, the triage approach should allow community workers to target communities which are surviving nicely on their own and need little (if any) outside assistance, as well as communities which are surviving but need assistance to remain viable (as well as what types of assistance are most needed) and communities which may not survive.[4] Gallaher and Padfield (1980) have indicated the potential

inevitability of community death in stating that, "(c)ommunities are born, grow, and sometimes prosper; many also decline, and some actually die." Those communities which die may well be ones which are missing some of the necessary ingredients metaphorically alluded to earlier.

Regarding the triage image, we want to emphaize that from our work it became quite clear that in order for a community to remain viable and stable it must have access to a resource base. This resource base can be mostly structural or mostly cultural, but it must be of sound enough quality to sustain a community. If a community does not have such a base, it may not be able to continue as a viable community. It is up to the investigator to determine whether a community has the necessary resources and what the nature of these resources are. They can then decide which elements in the community need to be strengthened and target energies toward this goal.

The general guidelines we have proffered can be used to start such an investigation, but no one should interpret them as definitive in nature. This has been a first approximation of a taxonomy of community stability. The triage image, we feel, has value especially in times of tight budgets such as these. Researchers in the field of community need to systematically articulate the characteristic attributes associated with the three types of communities we spoke of earlier (strong communities, communities surviving but needing help, and dying communities) (Burns, 1982; Gallaher and Padfield, 1980). They need to begin to thematize the important characteristics of community viability since this knowledge should aid them in distributing the available resources in the most effective manner possible, thereby minimizing the waste of human as well as government resources.

Finally, we feel that a return to the observational approach could be very benificial in identifying these characteristics. As Blumer (1956) has noted,

"variable" analysis can only do so much. It tends to greatly fracture on going processes and to leave out the actual complexes of activity. This leads variable analysis, when used as the sole analytic tool, to gloss over the character of the real operating factors in group life, and the real interaction and relations between such factors.

ENDNOTES

[1] By structure we are referring to stable patterns of social relations and obdurate reality which affect the life chances and lived experiences of human actors in a specifiable environment.

[2] The notion that small rural communities are in a transitional phase and that many may not survive is not simply a parochial view fostered by paranoid residents of small towns, it is an opinion held by numerous social researchers; see Burns, 1982.

[3] By culture we are referring to the non-obdurate shared meanings and symbolic elements used by a group of socially related individuals to create an experience of intersubjectivity.

[4] In this category of triage, the community analyst may attempt to aid in the phasing out of the community in the most humane and least damaging way possible. A recent example of this might be Times Beach, Missouri. The resources needed to restore that community were prohibitive of any such action and hence, the analyst may best serve the community by diverting resources from being used in an inevitably inadequate restoration attempt to phasing the community out and using the available resources to resettle the community members.

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